



YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

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Melissa Sawyer, M.Ed.
Co-Founder & Executive Director/CEO

May 20, 2019

Tenisha Stevens, Criminal Justice Commissioner
Office of Criminal Justice Coordination
City of New Orleans

Emily Wolff, Director
Office of Youth and Families
City of New Orleans

Dear Tenisha and Emily,

In the fall of 2018, Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) was approached by the City's Office of Youth and Families (OYF) and the Office of Criminal Justice Coordination (OCJC) to discuss our interest in supporting the development of a pilot project that would entail building a new alternative to detention program referred to as an Evening Reporting Center (ERC). This pilot would provide Orleans Parish Juvenile Court (OPJC) judges with an alternative to detention for up to fifteen (15) young people deemed appropriate. YEP was hopeful about the potential impact that an ERC would have in New Orleans as part of a continuum of services for young people in contact with the justice system, and we were encouraged by the widespread support that the proposed concept initially received – as members of the City Council and Juvenile Court were in favor of the development of the pilot. In December 2018, the City Council approved \$300,000 in the 2019 City Budget that would support the implementation of this pilot project and on May 9, 2019, the City Council approved a three-year CEA between OCJC and YEP to implement the proposed pilot program, despite many details not being finalized. As of May 20, 2019, there is not a fully executed CEA between YEP and the City and YEP has not received any funding for planning time or staff resources that it has committed to assisting with the design of this initiative over the past nine months.

Youth Empowerment Project is honored to have been invited into conversations related to the ERC and we have actively participated in dialogue with the City over the past months regarding the development of a pilot. We wholeheartedly believe in a holistic juvenile justice system that provides young people with the support, resources, and relationships they need to actualize their potential while also prioritizing the need for a safe and healthy community. YEP believes that the development and piloting of an ERC is a small but important step in this direction. As such, we applaud the City of New Orleans and Orleans Parish Juvenile Court for proposing the development of an ERC and we are grateful to the City Council for identifying and allocating critical resources to seed its development.

It is thus with great regret that at this time the Board and Executive Leadership of YEP feel obliged to withdraw from our proposed role as operator of the ERC. Over the course of the past nine months, YEP has devoted significant internal resources to assist with the program design, articulation of the specific population to be served, and development of policies and procedures necessary to implement a new program. However, we do not feel that we have the clarity or full support we need from key stakeholders to move forward. Over the past months, an increasing number of new stakeholders have voiced their concerns about the proposed program design, the lack of clarity regarding programmatic components and referral criteria, the overarching process, and whether having YEP pilot an ERC at a single site is the most needed intervention at this time. Additionally, as we realize that there is significant community concern regarding the recent increase in juvenile arrests for vehicle burglary offenses, we are concerned that we will not be able to meet the many different expectations that stakeholders have regarding the ability of the ERC to significantly reduce these crimes or the juvenile detention population as the design of the ERC pilot was only intended to serve 15 youth at a time. It is for these reasons that we unfortunately no longer feel that the environment in which we would be building and testing a pilot ERC program is conducive to its success.

YEP's priority is to ensure that we provide the highest quality programming to the more than 1,200 individuals we currently serve annually. We must remain focused on achieving our core purpose of empowering young people to improve their lives and the lives of others. As such, we have made the difficult decision that we must step back from the continuing conversations regarding the implementation of an ERC at this time and return our attention to operating a strong and sustainable organization that provides young people across our city and throughout the region with an array of impactful mentoring, education, enrichment and employment readiness programs.

We remain deeply committed to continuing to provide excellent services to young people in New Orleans, as we have done for the past 15 years, and we look forward to continuing to explore opportunities for partnership with the City, City Council, Juvenile Court and other key stakeholders that will enable us to further expand the positive impact that YEP has on the lives of youth and the larger community.

Sincerely,



Melissa Sawyer
Co-Founder/Executive Director



Christopher LeBato
Board Chair



Hon. Calvin Johnson, Ret.
Board Member

CC: Councilmember Helena Moreno
Councilmember Jason Williams
Councilmember Joseph Giarrusso
Councilmember Jay Banks
Councilmember Kristin Palmer
Councilmember Jared Brossett
Councilmember Cyndi Nguyen
Orleans Parish Juvenile Court Chief Judge Candice Bates-Anderson